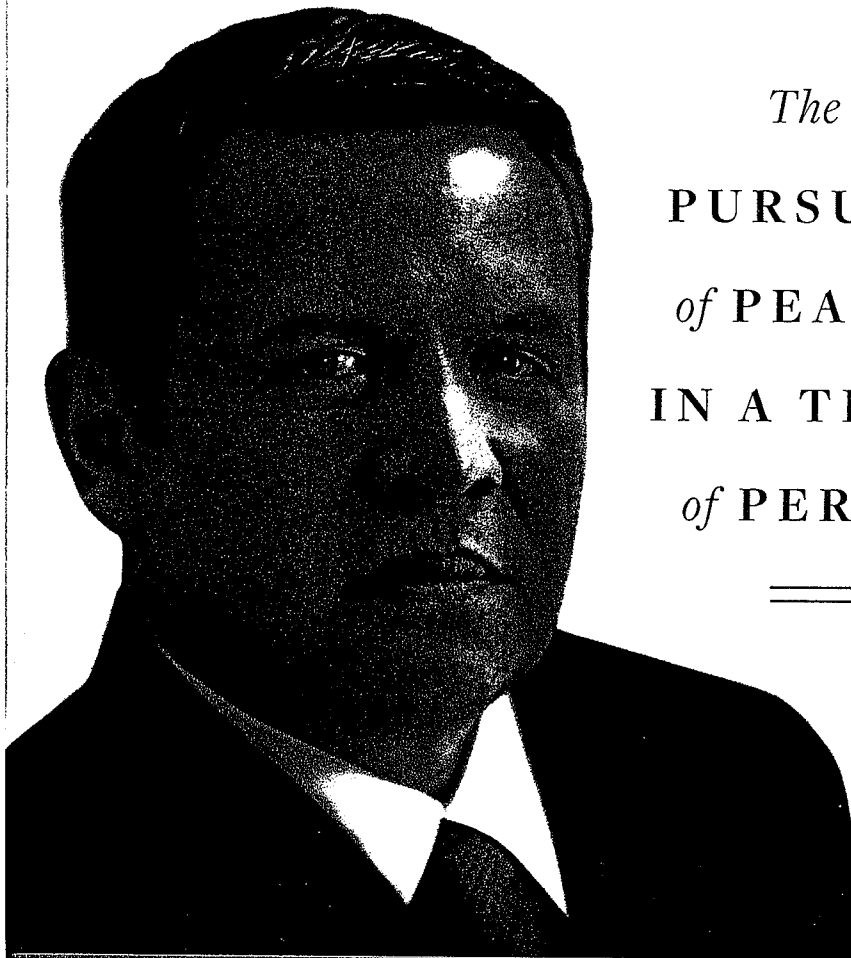


Our Last Best Chance



The
PURSUIT
of PEACE
IN A TIME
of PERIL

King Abdullah II of Jordan

VIKING

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A. • Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd) • Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd) • Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India • Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in 2011 by Viking Penguin, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Proceeds from the sale of this book will go to King's Academy, to support its scholarship fund for needy students.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Abdullah II, King of Jordan, 1962–

Our last best chance : the pursuit of peace in a time of peril / King Abdullah II.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-670-02171-0

1. Abdullah II, King of Jordan, 1962– 2. Jordan—Kings and rulers—Biography. 3. Jordan—Politics and government. 4. Peace-building—Middle East. 5. Arab-Israeli conflict—1993—Peace. I. Title.

DS154.6.A23A3 2010

956.95044092—dc22 2009054380

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Printed in the United States of America

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The Conflict Begins

One constant in my life ever since I was a small child has been the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Some people in the West and Israel like to portray this as the continuation of a centuries-old struggle. They are wrong. It is a relatively recent conflict, rooted in Jewish immigration into Palestine in the early twentieth century. In the Middle East, perhaps more than any other place, history matters, though far too many people use historical grievances as an excuse for not dealing with current problems. If you want to understand where you are going, it helps to know where you have come from. So before I try to explain the situation we find ourselves in today, and offer some suggestions on how to get out of the current stalemate, I would like to say a few words about the distance we have come.

As the Ottoman Empire, which extended over much of the Middle East from the early sixteenth century, was taking its last breath toward the end of World War I, the Arabs began to follow new nationalist leaders. One of these was my great-great-grandfather, Sharif Hussein bin Ali, the sharif of Mecca. A member of the Hashemite family, which had ruled Mecca since the tenth century, Sharif Hussein was an outspoken supporter of Arab nationalism. He was believed by other Arab nationalists to have the religious status and political experience to lead the Arab nationalist movement and the planned revolt against Ottoman rule, and to represent his people in negotiations with the British to secure an independent Arab state. His role was formalized by the Charter of Damascus in 1915. Negotiations between Sharif Hussein and the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, resulted in the secret Hussein-McMahon correspondence

of 1915–16 in which Sharif Hussein was promised support for a united and independent Arab kingdom under his rule. The agreement with McMahon was later subject to differing interpretations by the British and Arabs.

In June 1916, Sharif Hussein launched the Great Arab Revolt, initiating the revolutionary push for a single independent unified Arab state, and was declared King of the Arabs. His vision was to establish a new Arab country that would stretch from Palestine to Yemen. He believed that the Arab peoples could be united based on their shared culture and Islamic ideals, and he embraced a tradition of tolerance and respect for minorities. He hoped to bring about an Arab Renaissance. His four sons, Princes Ali, Faisal, Abdullah, and Zeid, led the Arab armies against the Ottoman forces. They were eventually victorious and succeeded in driving the Turks from Arabia in 1918. Faisal became king of Syria and then Iraq, and Abdullah became emir of Transjordan. Following Sharif Hussein's abdication in 1924, Ali became king of the Hijaz (later part of modern Saudi Arabia). Zeid worked with Faisal in Iraq, and served as Iraq's ambassador to Turkey, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

The Arab Revolt brought to prominence a young British officer who went by the name of T. E. Lawrence. He was later immortalized as "Lawrence of Arabia," played onscreen by Peter O'Toole in the 1962 film, parts of which were shot in Jordan. My great-great-uncle Prince Faisal was played in the film by Alec Guinness.

My mother briefly worked on the production of the film, but she left to marry my father in the summer of 1961. A few months later, she took him back to visit the set. The director was filming the scene in which Prince Faisal's camp is bombed by Turkish airplanes while his forces are en route to Damascus. My mother and father watched from a hill overlooking the set. When the word spread that my father was there, the bedouin extras left the camp and rushed up to him, shouting out their loyalty and admiration. Once things had settled down, the crew prepared to film the scene again. As the airplanes flew overhead, one of my father's retainers, a very tall old Nigerian man, turned to my father and said, "Sir, that's not the way it happened."

My father asked him how he knew this. "Well," he replied, "I was a child in that camp at the time, and the planes came from the other direction." After their visit, the production crew politely asked my father not to visit the set again.

The film was tremendously popular in the West, less so in Jordan, where it is viewed by many people as a partial and inaccurate retelling of history. And although Lawrence is seen today by many in the West as a romantic hero who played a key role in leading the Arab people to freedom, the view in my family of the historical record is considerably more measured. My great-grandfather King Abdullah I regarded Lawrence as a "strange character," eager to mold people to suit his interests. In his memoir he wrote:

His intrigues went as far as an attempt to influence me against my own father on the pretext that my father was obstinate. I sent his messenger back with this reply: "Tell your friend that my father is my lord and king. I shall be content with this relationship to the end of my days." In fact Lawrence rendered the Arabs the greatest service by reiterating that my father was determined in his aims. Lawrence appeared only to require people who had no views of their own, that he might impress his personal ideas upon them.

At the end of World War I, the fate of the Arabs was complicated by Great Power rivalries, since Britain had made secret promises not only to the sharif of Mecca but also to the French. Under the terms of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, modern-day Syria and Lebanon would fall under a French sphere of influence and modern-day Jordan, Iraq, Palestine, and what is now western Saudi Arabia into a British sphere. The San Remo Conference of 1920 formalized the new regional map as the French and British claimed responsibility for League of Nations mandates over these territories. On November 2, 1917, contravening promises made to the Arabs, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour had publicly stated his government's support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people."

Sharif Hussein felt that he could not in good conscience consent either to the British Mandate over Palestine or to the Balfour Declaration, as both represented a betrayal of the Arab Revolt. These pledges and arrangements would fuel the cause of Arab nationalism for several decades.

The new regional order was in part determined by Britain's colonial secretary, Winston Churchill. My great-grandfather Abdullah had a much higher opinion of Churchill than of Lawrence, describing him as "unique among the men Great Britain has produced in recent times." In 1921, Abdullah became the emir of Transjordan, which encompassed the lands to the east of the Jordan River. All the lands to the west of the Jordan, comprising modern-day Israel, the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, remained under British control as the British Mandate of Palestine.

Many thousands of Jewish immigrants began to arrive in Palestine, their movement encouraged and facilitated by the Balfour Declaration. At that time the Arabs accounted for some 90 percent of the population of Palestine. In 1897, the Zionist movement, at its first Congress in Basle, had defined its purpose as establishing "a home for the Jewish people in Palestine." By 1947, the number of Jews in Palestine had grown to about 600,000, the increase encouraged by the Zionist movement and reinforced by persecution in Europe. The large influx created tensions with the 1.2 million Muslim and Christian Palestinians. For the first time, America stepped into the arena, insisting that Palestine open its doors to 100,000 Jewish immigrants.

In a prophetic article written in the now defunct *American* magazine in 1947, six months before the first Arab-Israeli war, my great-grandfather warned of the dangers of unchecked immigration:

No people on earth have been less "anti-Semitic" than the Arabs. The persecution of the Jews has been confined almost entirely to the Christian nations of the West. Jews, themselves, will admit that never since the Great Dispersion did Jews develop so freely and reach such importance as in Spain when it was an Arab

possession. With very minor exceptions, Jews have lived for many centuries in the Middle East, in complete peace and friendliness with their Arab neighbors. . . .

I have the impression that many Americans believe the trouble in Palestine is very remote from them, that America had little to do with it, and that your only interest now is that of a humane bystander.

I believe that you do not realize how directly you are, as a nation, responsible in general for the whole Zionist move and specifically for the present terrorism. I call this to your attention because I am certain that if you realize your responsibility you will act fairly to admit it and assume it.

The present catastrophe may be laid almost entirely at your door. Your government, almost alone in the world, is insisting on the immediate admission of 100,000 more Jews into Palestine—to be followed by countless additional ones. This will have the most frightful consequences in bloody chaos beyond anything ever hinted at in Palestine before.

I have the most complete confidence in the fair-mindedness and generosity of the American public. We Arabs ask no favors. We ask only that you know the full truth, not half of it. We ask only that when you judge the Palestine question, you put yourselves in our place. What would your answer be if some outside agency told you that you must accept in America many millions of utter strangers in your midst—enough to dominate your country—merely because they insisted on going to America, and because their forefathers had once lived there some 2,000 years ago?

Our answer is the same.

And what would be your action if, in spite of your refusal, this outside agency began forcing them on you?

Ours will be the same.

From the beginning, the conflict in Palestine has been a struggle between Jewish immigrants and the existing Arab Palestinian people,

not, as it is often portrayed, the continuation of ancient hatreds between Jews and Arabs.

Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s the British tried to limit the number of Jewish immigrants pouring into Palestine. Zionist organizations such as Haganah, the Irgun, and Lohamei Herut Israel (also known as the Stern Gang) conducted assassinations, planted bombs, and engaged in other acts of terrorism and sabotage to scare Palestinians from their land, force the British to leave Palestine, and impose a Jewish state.

In November 1944, the Stern Gang assassinated the British minister of state for the Middle East, Lord Moyne, in Cairo. Two years later, members of the Irgun planted a bomb in Jerusalem's King David Hotel, which housed the British Mandate secretariat and British military intelligence headquarters. Ninety-one people were killed. And in August 1947, in retaliation for the execution of three Jewish terrorists, the Irgun kidnapped two British sergeants and hanged them from eucalyptus trees in a forest south of the coastal town of Netanya. They booby-trapped the bodies, so that when British troops tried to cut them down a bomb exploded and injured another officer. This barbaric incident was widely condemned. The leader of the Irgun, Menachem Begin, would later go on to found the right-wing Herut Movement and become prime minister of Israel.

The British announced on September 23, 1947, that they would terminate their Mandate in Palestine by May 15, 1948. They had decided to hand over the problem of who should rule Palestine to the new United Nations, set up in 1945. Interestingly, the UN came up with a two-state solution. On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly voted to partition Palestine into two states, one Arab and one Jewish, with Jerusalem designated as an international city under UN control. Under Resolution 181 half the territory, including the valuable coastline, was given to the Jews, who at the time controlled only 6 percent of the land. Conflict was inevitable.

Even before the formal outbreak of hostilities in May 1948, there were bloody clashes between Jewish and Arab communities. On April 9, 1948, Jewish terrorists from the Stern Gang and the Irgun attacked

the village of Deir Yassin, several miles to the west of Jerusalem, and massacred 250 people, mostly women and children. To protect the Palestinians from such atrocities, my great-grandfather, King Abdullah I, began in late April to move Arab Legion forces across the River Jordan. At the same time, the Jewish leaders began to marshal their forces, including their nascent army, the Haganah, the Irgun, and the Stern Gang.

On May 14, 1948, the day the British Mandate ended, the Jewish People's Council declared the establishment of the state of Israel. Eleven minutes later, this new entity was recognized by U.S. president Harry Truman, followed by the Soviet Union. The tensions between Jews and Arabs did not take long to escalate into armed conflict. On the night Israel declared its independence, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq sent troops into Palestine to try to protect the rights of Arab Palestinians. The new Israeli army outnumbered Arab troops and slowly gained the upper hand, profiting from a lack of coordination among the Arab forces.

Jerusalem, with its religious significance for Muslims, Jews, and Christians and its strategic importance for the center of Palestine, was the main focus of the fighting. One of the fiercest battles was around the village of Latrun, allotted to the Arabs under the partition plan, where Jordanian and Israeli forces fought for control of a key road leading into Jerusalem. The Jordanian forces, commanded by Habis Majali, repelled several attacks by the Israeli forces. In one engagement, a young Israeli platoon commander was shot and severely wounded by the Jordanian forces. His name was Ariel Sharon, and he would go on to become a prominent military and political figure—defense minister, and then prime minister.

The Arab Legion, commanded by my great-grandfather, was among the best-equipped and -trained but also one of the smallest of the Arab armies. It managed to hold the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and even made gains. In the spring of 1949, after more than eight months of fierce fighting punctuated by intermittent pauses, representatives of Israel and the Arab states met on the Greek island of Rhodes. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and Israel

signed a general armistice agreement on April 3. The West Bank had been allocated to the Arabs by the UN, and in recognition of my great-grandfather's role in protecting the Palestinians and holding the West Bank, a group of Palestinian leaders now called for unity with the East Bank under my great-grandfather, who on May 25, 1946, was proclaimed King of Jordan by Parliament, which also changed the name of the country from the Emirate of Transjordan to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. So in April 1950, in an Act of Union of the two banks of the Jordan, the West Bank formally became part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and gained representation in the Jordanian parliament and government.

Before, during, and after the 1948 war some 750,000 Palestinian Arab refugees fled the fighting or were evicted from their homes. They settled in the West Bank, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the Gulf states, and elsewhere in the region and beyond. In many countries they remained stateless refugees, unable to travel or work, and living in United Nations refugee camps, but my great-grandfather welcomed the Palestinian refugees to Jordan, granting them Jordanian citizenship. More than sixty years later, the right of these refugees and their descendants to return to their homes in what is now Israel remains one of the most contentious issues between Israel and the Palestinians.

Famous for his compassion and kindness, my great-grandfather took a special interest in my father. He understood English but did not speak it, so he would sometimes call my father to his office in the palace to act as his translator. In the evening, my great-grandfather would discuss the events of the day over dinner, explaining to my father the intricacies and subtleties of the diplomatic negotiations he had been translating.

My father was sent away to boarding school in Egypt. He went to Victoria College in Alexandria, which at the time was probably the best school in the region. In the summer of 1951 he was back in Jordan when tragedy struck. On July 20, on a visit to Jerusalem for Friday prayers, my great-grandfather was assassinated by a Palestinian gunman at the entrance to the Al Aqsa Mosque. The assassin, a

member of the radical group Jihad Muqaddas, shot my great-grandfather in the head and killed him. My father was at his side. He was then fifteen. He chased the murderer, who opened fire on him. A second bullet from the assassin's gun miraculously bounced off a medal that was pinned to his chest—it missed killing him by the narrowest of margins—and a third clipped his ear. The assassin was then killed by my great-grandfather's guards. Six other men were later arrested and sentenced to death for their parts in the plot. Four were executed, but two somehow managed to find refuge in Egypt, which refused to hand them over.

My great-grandfather's tragic murder was mourned across the region and the world. My grandfather, Talal bin Abdullah, who had attended the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in the United Kingdom and served in the Arab Legion as a cavalry officer, became king, and in accordance with the Constitution, which states that succession passes to the king's eldest son, my father became crown prince.

At the time, Egypt was publicly antagonistic toward the Jordanian government, and it was felt that it was too risky for my father to continue his schooling in Alexandria. So he was sent to Harrow in England. Although my father knew that he would someday assume official duties, his personal hope was that he would be able to finish his education and begin a career, living an ordinary life for a time. But my grandfather, who suffered from schizophrenia, was unable to rule for long due to poor health, and he abdicated a year after he assumed office. On August 12, 1952, my father was on summer holiday from Harrow in Switzerland with his mother, Queen Zein Al Sharaf. He was staying at the Beau Rivage Hotel on Lake Geneva when he received a telegram addressed to "His Majesty King Hussein."

Back in Amman, my father discussed with his uncle Sharif Nasser bin Jamil how best to fill his time, as it would be six months before he would reach the legal age to accede to the throne. Their conversation turned to Sandhurst, which was famous for educating leaders in all walks of life. His uncle said, "Your father went to Sandhurst. I remember him telling me that Sandhurst was the greatest military

academy in the world and the finest place for a man to learn to be a king."

My father's mind flashed back to when he was a child playing toy soldiers, and he remembered my grandfather saying, "No man can rule a country without discipline. No man can be a good soldier without discipline. And nowhere in the world do they teach men discipline like they do at Sandhurst."

So on September 9, 1952, Officer Cadet King Hussein arrived at Sandhurst and joined Inkerman Company. The regular yearlong course was compressed into six months. Although my father had a demanding schedule, with extra drills and marching, that time was one of the happiest and most formative periods of his life. For a brief moment longer, he would be a cadet among other cadets.

On May 2, 1953, when he reached the age of eighteen, my father assumed his responsibilities as king. He would rule Jordan for forty-six years and would see four major wars between Israel and the Arab states. He would eventually reach a peace treaty with Israel, and would see his Israeli partner assassinated for seeking peace, but he would not live to see the end of the conflict he had so yearned to help settle.

My father's first test, three years after he assumed the throne, was the Suez crisis. Following the Egyptian revolution of 1952, which toppled King Farouk and led to the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser, nationalist sentiment was running high in Egypt. In 1956 Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, which until then had been controlled by Britain and France. In reaction, the two countries cooked up a secret plan with Israel. Israel would attack Egypt, and in response Britain and France would send "peacekeeping troops" that would retake control of the canal.

The Israelis kept their side of the bargain, advancing into the Sinai Peninsula in October 1956. An Anglo-French task force deployed shortly afterward and seized the canal. While militarily successful, the operation became a political fiasco as news of the plot leaked.

Under pressure from the United States, Britain and France were forced to remove their troops, and British prime minister Anthony Eden resigned. The Suez crisis strengthened Nasser's Arab nationalist credentials and heightened tensions between Israel and the Arab world. It also suggested the usefulness of a crisis as a pretext for intervention by Western powers. Thankfully, Jordan avoided being drawn into the Suez affair. But we were not so fortunate the next time Egypt and Israel fought each other, in the spring of 1967.